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# IRISH BIBLICAL STUDIES

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## The Significance of the Phrase 'Fishers of Men' in the Synoptic Gospels.

D. Rudman

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The metaphor "fishers of men" in the call narrative involving Simon, Andrew, James and John is usually understood to describe the missionary activity of the early church. An understanding of the chaotic nuances associated with the sea in this metaphor, and of the different ways in which Jesus confronts chaos and commissions the disciples to do so, reveals that it is multivalent. While it may refer to preaching the gospel, "fishing for men" can also refer to the activities of healing, raising the dead, or exorcism.

### I. Introduction

The story of Jesus' call of the disciples Simon, Andrew, James and John in Matt 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20; Luke 5:3-11 is not generally recognised as a problematic passage in terms of its interpretation or theology. Most debate has in fact centred on the historicity of the events described in the narrative, with some arguing that the story is essentially based on an eyewitness account, while others counter that it is purely legendary in nature.

Among the latter, Bultmann is the most extreme proponent of the view that Jesus' call to the fishermen is an "ideal scene" arising out of the metaphor "fishers of men" (Matt 4:19; Mark 1:17; Luke 5:10).<sup>1</sup> Ironically, the same metaphor is seen by the former as evidence for the historicity of this vignette. Elsewhere in the OT, the image of fishing for human prey is always negative (Jer 16:16 cf. Ezek 29:4-5; Amos 4:2; Hab 1:14-17).<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, the

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<sup>1</sup> R. Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> W. Wuellner, *The Meaning of "Fishers of Men"* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), pp. 88-133; C. W. F. Smith argues on this basis (and

argument goes, the metaphor would not have been used by Jesus unless it was suggested by what Simon and his fellows were actually doing. The detailed nature of the narrative in terms of the actions of the characters ("casting a net...fishermen...fishers of men...in a boat, mending their nets") also, for Cranfield, suggests an historical reminiscence. For him, therefore, what we have here is not a fictional narrative but Petrine eyewitness.<sup>3</sup>

Adopting a stance somewhere between both poles is Anderson, who sees Bultmann's proposition as merely speculative, but also rightly points out the dubious nature of Cranfield's view that the narrative details betoken Petrine eyewitness. In fact, the most notable aspect of the narrative is the bareness of the information provided. Jesus arrives, calls his disciples-to-be, and they leave everything and follow him. There is no debate, there is no reflection on the consequences for them or their families (Simon at least seems to be married, since he has a mother-in-law [Matt 8:14-15; Mark 1:29-31; Luke 4:38-39]), nor is there any reference to the psychology of the participants in the drama.<sup>4</sup> Possibly, as Anderson suggests, there is an historical kernel to the story. However, it has now become

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comparing 1QH V 7-8; Matt 13:47-50) that the brothers' task is to summon people for judgment rather than to win them for the kingdom of God ("Fishers of Men" *HTR* 52 [1959], pp. 187-203). This view has not found favour since it militates against the plain sense of the text.

<sup>3</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 70. G. Klein, "Die Berufung des Petrus," *ZNW* 58 (1967), pp. 1-44; W. Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (THNT 2; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1977), pp. 54-55; D. A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13* (WBC 33A; Dallas: Word, 1993), p. 76; C. S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 150-51).

<sup>4</sup> H. Anderson, *The Gospel of Mark* (NCBC; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1976), p. 87; E. Best, *Mark: The Gospel as Story* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1988), pp. 64, 83.



generally accepted that this is beyond the power of the biblical scholar to verify.<sup>5</sup>

## II. *The Significance of the Fishing Metaphor*

For all the commentators noted so far, the central aspect of the call narrative is the metaphor “fishers of men”, derived from the stated occupations of Simon, Andrew, James and John. However, remarkably little (other than the article by Smith mentioned in n. 2) has been written about the significance of this expression. Instead, there is a scholarly consensus that it is simply a neat adaptation of the negative OT usages reapplied to the missionary work of the early church.

While I do not take issue with this viewpoint at a fundamental level, it seems to me that the image of the disciples of Jesus fishing for men has a deeper resonance with OT theology than has hitherto been assumed by commentators on this passage, and that this has led to a more superficial reading of the narrative than its author intended. In order to demonstrate this assertion, it will firstly be necessary to examine the characterisation of the sea in OT and NT texts (including the gospels) and to make some suggestions on the basis of this and other texts about the nature of Jesus’ mission.

### (a) *The Sea*

While it is true that some texts in the OT stress the idea that the sea is part of God’s Creation (Ps 95:5), by far the majority express the view of creation as a process in which Yahweh placed limits on the elements of chaos (especially the sea and darkness) and thereby established a place in which life could be sustained. The twin characteristics of the uncreated world in Gen 1:2 are darkness and the deep. God’s first actions are to create light and establish

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<sup>5</sup> Recent scholarship tends to steer clear of questions relating to historicity. Note here the carefully chosen words of M. Davies: “Simon and his brother Andrew are described as fishermen, which allowed Jesus to interpret their calling metaphorically to become ‘fishers of people’, that is, missionaries” (*Matthew* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993], p. 47).

boundaries for darkness (i.e. the creation of day and night [Gen 1:4-5]), and to divide the waters and gather the lower waters to one place (i.e. the creation of the sky and dry land [Gen 1:6-10]).<sup>6</sup> The story of the Flood (Genesis 6-8) represents a literal undoing of creation by God. In Gen 7:20-21, the fountains of the deep and the windows of heaven are unstopped and all land based life is erased as the chaos waters assume their natural space. Noah's ark, with its human and animal cargo, has effectively become the cosmos. Appropriately, the emergence of this cargo is depicted as a new creation. God blesses Noah and his sons, as was the case with the first humans (Gen 9:1 cf. 1:28), and they are given dominion over the animal kingdom (9:2 cf. 1:28). In Gen 9:17, God orders the animals to emerge from the ark, "every living thing" (כל החיה, cf. Gen 1:20-21, 24), "bird" (עוף, cf. 2:20-21, 26), "beast" (בהמה, cf. 2:24-26) and "every creeping thing that creeps" (כל הרמש הרמש, cf. 2:26) so that they can "swarm" (שרץ, cf. 1:20-21) and "be fruitful and multiply" (פרו ורבו, cf. 1:22), in a replay of P's creation story.<sup>7</sup>

Although there are a few texts in the OT that represent the sea in a positive light (Isa 48:18; Ps 104: 25), the identification of the deep with the forces of chaos elsewhere makes clear the negative way in which the sea was viewed by most Israelites. Water imagery could be used to characterise the hostility of surrounding nations (Jer 6:23 cf. Ps 65:8 [Eng. 7]; Isa 8:5-8; 17:12-14),<sup>8</sup> while the plotting of the wicked could be compared to the restless sea (Isa 57:20). Both the nations and the wicked are viewed as representatives of chaos (i.e.

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<sup>6</sup> The parting of the Red Sea was also seen by Second Isaiah as a creative act (Isa 43:16-17; 50:2; 51:9-10). Israel are thereby created as a separate entity for the first time, after being subsumed by the chaotic power of Egypt (on the nations as chaotic entities, see below). It is a nice irony that Pharaoh's forces, the representatives of chaos, are themselves engulfed by the chaos waters.

<sup>7</sup> S. Niditch, *Chaos to Cosmos: Studies in Biblical Patterns of Creation* (Chico: Scholars, 1985), p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> E. R. Follis, "Sea" in *ABD* 5.1059.



of anti-creational forces) because they disrupt the order that Yahweh has intended for the world.

The negative representation of the sea in the OT finds several echoes in the NT. In Ps 104:7-9, an ancient author describes the moment of creation when “at (Yahweh’s) rebuke the waters fled...(He) set a boundary they cannot pass...” (cf. Jer 5:22; Job 38:8-10). The story of Jesus’ calming of the storm in Mark 4:35-41 makes use of the motif of the forces of chaos (there the wind and waves) being stilled with a rebuke (ἐπετίμησεν, v. 39) and a command to be silent, just as in the LXX translation of Ps 104:7 (ἐπιτιμήσειω).<sup>9</sup> Jesus reenacts the creation as a sign that he has divine power, and perhaps that his eschatological mission is one of reforming the creation. The terror of his companions in v. 41 (“Who is this? Even the wind and waves obey him!”) is based on the premise that Jesus has performed the action of a god.<sup>10</sup> Jesus’ mastery over the deep may also be witnessed by Matt 14:22-33; Mark 6:47-51, in which Jesus walks across the sea to save his disciples, once more at the mercy of an unpredictable sea. Again, echoes of the theme of chaos are evident in this story since the activity is said to take place at night (Matt 14:23, 25; Mark 6:47-48). For the biblical authors, night was the time when the power of chaos was at its height: thieves operated (Job 24:14; Jer 49:9; Matt 24:43; I Thess 5:2) and the wicked carried out their plots (Job 38:12-13). Paul contrasts the immorality of the night-time (τα ἔργα του σκότους, “deeds of darkness”) with the law-abiding behaviour that marks the daylight hours (Rom 13:12-13) and Luke sees a special significance in Jesus’ arrest at night (“Every day I was with you in the temple courts, and you did not lay a hand on me. but this is your hour—when darkness reigns” [Luke 22:53]).<sup>11</sup> Given the

<sup>9</sup> E. Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark* (London: SCM, 1970), p. 110.

<sup>10</sup> Wind does not really appear in the OT as an expression of chaos, although the phrase רוח אלהים in Gen 1:2 may mean “mighty wind” (so NEB) rather than “spirit of God.” If so this would constitute a clear usage of the term in a chaotic context.

<sup>11</sup> M. L. Barré, “Night” in K. van der Toorn, B. Becking, P. W. van der Horst (eds.), *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden/Grand Rapids: Brill/Eerdmans, 1999), p. 624.



chaotic context, the disciples unsurprisingly think Jesus is an escapee from the netherworld when he walks across the waters to them (Matt 14:26; Mark 6:49). This adds to the sense of chaos since death was also seen by biblical authors as a manifestation of chaos. Death is a reversal of creation. The lifebreath granted by the Creator to the individual returns to the Creator at the time of death (Eccl 12:7 cf. Gen 2:7). Sheol, the place where the essence of the individual resides after death, is a place of dust (Job 17:16; 21:26) and silence (Pss 31:17-18; 94:17; 115:17; Isa 47:5). It is a sterile, lifeless place, not unlike the land in Gen 2:5 before the creation of humanity (cf. also Gen 1:9-10). As the abode of the uncreated (that is, of those whose lifebreath has been taken back by the Creator), Sheol stands outside creation and is equated with chaos. Thus, it is associated with darkness (Job 17:13 cf. Lam 3:6; Job 18:18), and, like the chaos waters of Gen 7:11; 8:2; Isa 24:8, is fitted with portals (Isa 38:10; Pss 9:14 [Eng. 13]; Job 38:17) and bars (Jon 2:7 [Eng. 6]; Job 38:10) to prevent the escape of its inhabitants. The association of Sheol with chaos led some biblical writers to use the metaphor of the individual being engulfed by the sea to characterise Death (Jon 2:3-10 [Eng. 2-9] cf. Pss 42:8; 69:2-3, 15-16; 88:7-8; Job 38:16-18). In eschatological texts, the defeat of Death is a vital part of the wider defeat of chaos (Isa 25:8; 26:19; Dan 12:1-3).<sup>12</sup>

The negative characterisation of the sea in the NT may also be seen in the book of Revelation. It is no surprise that the chaos monsters representing the nations in Daniel 7 and the first of the beasts in Revelation 13 appear from out of the sea. Appropriately, with the final victory of God over chaos and the reformation of the creation, the sea is dried up (Rev 21:1 cf. Sib 5:447-48; AssMos 10)—that is, the chaotic power it represents is destroyed and creation finally perfected. Incidentally, night also ceases to exist in this new creation (Rev 22:5 cf. 21:25; Isa 60:18-12; Zech 14:7).

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. D. Rudman, "Reflections on a Half-Created World: The Sea, Night and Death in the Bible," *BBS* 19 (2000), pp. 33-42; "The Use of Water Imagery in Descriptions of Sheol," *ZAW* 113 (2001), pp. 240-44.

(b) *Synthesis*

All of this theology of creation, order and chaos feeds into the apparently simple metaphor of Simon, Andrew, James and John as “fishers of men.” These four who are to become Jesus’ first disciples are used to risking their lives among the elements of chaos, for the fishermen of the Sea of Galilee<sup>13</sup> not only put out in boats on dangerous waters, but habitually did so during the hours of darkness (cf. Luke 5:5; John 21:3). I suggest that the ultimate significance of this metaphor extends beyond the simplistic “disciples = fishermen, unbelieving humanity = fish” parallel. In the light of the OT and NT evidence put forward here, it would be more appropriate to imagine their new role, as fishers of men, as being to pluck other human beings from their subjugation to chaos. This idea was put forward almost half a century ago in a brief note by Manek. However, perhaps because he did not expand on how he envisioned humanity as subject to chaos, it has not found favour among subsequent scholars.<sup>14</sup> Underlying the theology of the OT and NT texts dealing with the sea (and especially those with an eschatological slant) is the idea that the powers of chaos represent a continuing threat to the created order. In fact, this theme is also prominent in the synoptic gospels, especially in Jesus’ confrontations with demonic forces. Some exploration of this theme is appropriate, since it may help us to understand how the original NT authors might have construed the mission of the earliest disciples.

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<sup>13</sup> An interesting observation is made by M. D. Hooker (*The Gospel According to St. Mark* [London: Black, 1991], p. 59), who notes that Mark always refers to the lake of Galilee as a “sea” (θάλασσα) whereas the expected term would be λίμνη (“lake”). Although it is true that Aristotle once uses θάλασσα in the sense of lake (*Meteorologica* 351a 9), it seems likely that Mark is emphasising the chaotic associations of fishing on the sea.

<sup>14</sup> J. Manek, “Fishers of Men,” *NovT* 2 (1958), pp. 138-41.

(i) *Demonic Powers*

Jesus' confrontation with the powers of chaos is given its most explicit expression in those scenes in which he comes face to face with Satan or other representatives of the demonic. In the OT, wilderness areas were seen as places of chaos or uncreation because they are uninhabitable by (that is, hostile to) human beings or normal animal life (so, e.g., the use of the term *חֲדָשׁ* in Gen 1:2 and Deut 32:10; Job 6:18; 12:24; Isa 24:10; Isa 45:18). In the NT, demons are depicted as wandering in desert areas (Matt 12:43). Appropriately, it is in the wilderness, Satan's own territory, that Jesus confronts Satan (Matt 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13). Yet, the power of chaos is at its most disturbing for the biblical authors in those scenes that show how it can insinuate itself into the normal, ordered world. This ability is most clearly seen in those passages describing Jesus' healing ministry, where the line drawn between sickness and possession by evil spirits is often indistinct (cf. Matt 4:23-25; 8:16-17; 10:1; Mark 1:34; 6:13).<sup>15</sup> By casting out demons and/or healing the sick, Jesus is seen to confront the chaos manifested in everyday life and to impose order. Thus, for example, by cleansing lepers (cf. esp. Matt 8:1-4; Mark 1:40-45; Luke 5:12-17), Jesus reintegrates those cast out of society back into the ordered world that had rejected them. By casting out demons (e.g. Matt 8:28-34; Mark 5:1-12; Luke 8:26-33), those likewise forced to live outside society (here, among the dead, and therefore in another chaotic place, Matt 8:28; Mark 5:1; Luke 8:27) are reintegrated by Jesus (Mark 5:19; Luke 8:39).

(ii) *The Authorities*

Less explicit, but nevertheless evident to the careful reader, is the equation of the authorities (especially the religious authorities) with the realm of chaos. Earlier in this article, I have noted the equivalence of death and chaos in both OT and NT texts, and just

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<sup>15</sup> See the discussion by D. G. Reese ("Demons" in *ABD* 2, pp. 140-41) and J. G. Kallas (*The Significance of the Synoptic Miracles* [London: SPCK, 1961], pp. 78-79).



now pointed to how the Gerasene demoniac, overwhelmed by his chaotic possessors, is depicted as living in a place of death and non-existence. The motif of the tomb in this story also makes its appearance in a report in Matthew of a swingeing attack by Jesus on the religious authorities "...you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness (ἀνομίας)" (Matt 23:27-28). Put simply, chaos is the absence of creation and/or the absence of law (νόμος). Those who are without law, or who do not obey the law are, by definition, chaotic, and therefore opposed to God (accounting for the many cases noted earlier where the wicked are associated with the sea [Isa 57:20]; or darkness [Job 24:14; 38:12-13; Rom 13:12-13]). Luke's equation of those who arrest Jesus by night with the powers of darkness (Luke 22:53) makes a similar point about the ultimate allegiances of the religious authorities, not to God and order, but to chaos and evil (a point made the more clearly by the fact that Luke has Satan, who has taken over Judas, conferring with the temple authorities about how to do away with Jesus [Luke 22:3]).

### (iii) *The Nations*

As the Psalmist hints, an Israel subject to the dominion of the nations was a sign of a world in chaos (conversely, an independent Israel ruled by a just king could be seen as a perfection of creation [Isa 11:1-9]). For many OT authors, Israel was a microcosm of creation, and the hostile nations that surrounded it equivalent to the waters that continually sought to engulf the created world. The image of the nations as chaotic in nature has a particular resonance in eschatological texts such as Daniel 7, where four composite beasts arise from out of the sea. Commentators differ as to the details of interpretation on this text, but almost all agree that, for the author of Daniel, these represent the kings of the chaotic empires that held Israel in thrall from the time of the exile.<sup>16</sup> A similar

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<sup>16</sup> J. A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (ICC; Edinburgh: Clark, 1927), p. 285; A. Lacocque, *The Book of Daniel* (Atlanta: Knox, 1979), p. 138; J. J. Collins, *Seers, Sybils &*

interpretation is generally placed on the chaos monsters in Revelation (i.e. that they represent Rome and/or various of its emperors), which are also connected with the sea.<sup>17</sup>

The gospel writers are, however, generally more circumspect about their assessment of the Roman Empire (Acts 1:6 is more than a little evasive about the restoration of Israel, and Matt 22:21; Mark 12:17; Luke 20:25 all quote the same saying counselling acquiescence to the Roman system of taxation).<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, there is at least one hint, in the narrative of the Gerasene demoniac, that even to the gospel communities, the Romans could be identified with the forces of chaos. When questioned by Jesus, the demons inhabiting the Gerasene demoniac give their name as “Legion” (Mark 5:9; Luke 8:30—this detail is apparently suppressed in Matthew). In both gospels, the explanation offered for the name is linked to the multitude of demons that have taken up residence in the victim. However, one may also see the possessed man as a metaphor for an Israel that is under the control of Rome’s legions (cf. again, the depiction of the armies of the nations with chaos imagery in Jer

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*Sages in Hellenistic-Roman Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), p. 145. A dissonant voice which rejects any link with chaos is A. J. Ferch (“Daniel 7 & Ugarit: A Reconsideration,” *JBL* 99 [1980], p. 75).

<sup>17</sup> J. P. M. Sweet, *Revelation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), p. 208; A. Y. Collins, *Crises and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), p. 59.

<sup>18</sup> A. E. J. Rawlinson (*The Gospel According to St. Mark* [London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1925], p. 165) and B. H. Branscombe (*The Gospel of Mark* [London: Methuen, 1937], p. 213-14) both draw attention to Jesus’ bald acknowledgement of the fact that all coinage was ultimately the property of the ruler whose portrait it bore. No comment is made on the rightness or wrongness of Caesar’s rule, and certainly there is no recognition implied of the idea that temporal rulers possessed a divinely-given authority as we find in Paul (Rom 8:1ff.). On Acts, cf. e.g. F. F. Bruce (*The Book of the Acts* [London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1965], p. 38).

6:22-23; Isa 8:5-8; 17:12-14; Ps 65:8 [Eng. 7]).<sup>19</sup> Arguably, this identification links the Romans with the eschatological foe of Israel.

(iv) *Death*

Again, it has already been noted that Death is seen in many OT texts, especially those with an eschatological slant, as a manifestation of chaos. There are stories in the gospels of Jesus' resurrection of individuals as part of his overarching healing ministry. If the death of the individual can be conceived as a movement from the world of creation to that of uncreation, that is, to the chaotic, then the resurrection of the individual can be seen as a form of re-creation, a reemergence of the individual from chaos. By resurrecting the daughter of the synagogue leader (Matt 9:18-26; Mark 5:21-41; Luke 5:21-41) or Lazarus (John 11:38-44), Jesus once again demonstrates his mastery over chaos and his status as a creator-figure radically opposed to chaos.

Appropriately, the narratives concerning Jesus' own death in the synoptic gospels (Matt 27:45-54; Mark 15:33-39; Luke 23:44-47) also make much use of chaos imagery. It is significant, for example, that as Jesus dies on the cross, all three synoptics relate that a darkness gradually spread over the earth. In essence, the Passion Narrative as told in the synoptics may be read in the light of the OT chaoskampf tradition as a text in which as Jesus the creator-figure weakens, the power of chaos over the world increases. The narratives culminate with the tearing of the temple curtain (Matt 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45). Traditionally, this is seen either as indicating the future destruction of the temple, or as indicating the end of temple ritual and the traditional barriers between God and

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<sup>19</sup> J. Marcus (*Mark 1-8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 27; New York: Doubleday, 1999], pp. 351-52) notes in the context of the swine into which Jesus drives the demons that the wild boar was the symbol of the legion posted in Palestine at this time. Cf. also B. Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 183.



Humanity.<sup>20</sup> However, reference to Josephus, who states that the curtain bore a representation of the cosmos (BJ 5.212-13 cf. the four colours of the curtain in 2 Chr 3:14, which are linked by Josephus to the four elements that make up the cosmos),<sup>21</sup> suggests that the moment of Jesus's death sees a rending of creation prior to its reformation, under a new set of rules, with Jesus' resurrection (that is, with his own personal conquest over death).<sup>22</sup>

### III. *Conclusions*

In the light of some of the observations above about the nature of Jesus' mission and its interaction with the forces of chaos, it is now possible to see some of the ways in which the disciples might be viewed as "fishers of men." In Mark 6:7-13, the disciples are commissioned to follow Jesus's example. It is said that "he gave them authority over the unclean spirits...(and) they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed many who were sick and cured them." In Matt 10:8, the disciples are told "Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons." The disciples become fishers of men in their preaching activity, since by doing so they draw people from a course which is opposed to God (and hence chaotic—possibly criticism of contemporary religious authorities is also implied here) and place them into alignment with God. However, by curing the

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<sup>20</sup> The view that the tearing of the curtain signifies the destruction of the temple, is adopted by Rawlinson (*St. Mark*, p. 238), Branscombe (*Mark*, p. 299) and H. M. Jackson "The Death of Jesus in Mark and the Miracle from the Cross," *NTS* 33 [1987], pp. 16-37). Among those who take the figurative approach are Schweizer (*The Good News According to Mark* (London: SCM, 1970, p. 354) and B. M. F. van Iersel (*Mark: A Reader-response Commentary* [JSNTS 164; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998], p. 474).

<sup>21</sup> M. Barker, "Beyond the Veil of the Temple: The High Priestly Origins of the Apocalypses," *SJT* 51 (1998), pp. 3-4.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. D. Rudman, "The Crucifixion as Chaoskampf," *Bib* 84 (2003), pp. 102-07.

sick, especially those with maladies which place them at the margins of society, they also snatch people back from chaos. The leper denied social contact since the impurity associated with leprosy was transmissible (m. Meg. 1:7; m. Neg. 8:8; 13:17; m. Kelim 1:4), the maimed who must beg for their living rather than engage in the everyday occupations that maintain the fabric of society (e.g. Mark 10:46-52 [note the location of the blind man by the roadside *outside* the city]), the demon-possessed who are chained up or outcast (e.g. Mark 5:2-4), the dead (Matt 9:18-26; Mark 5:21-41; Luke 5:21-41):<sup>23</sup> these are the fish for whom the disciples also spread their nets in the gospels (Mark 6:7-13; Matt 10:1, 7-8), and subsequently in the book of Acts (3:1-9; 5:15-16; 20:7-12). In a world where chaos manifests itself in a hundred guises, the fishing metaphor applied to the disciples must also be seen as multivalent.

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<sup>23</sup> So Hooker (*Mark*, p. 72), who notes that "...those who were excluded from the community because of their infirmity are restored to membership of God's people (1:44; 5:15, 34)." Cf. also R. H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on his Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 67.

## SOME THOUGHTS ON PENAL SUBSTITUTION

*Professor Howard Marshall*

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### Introduction

I was delighted to receive the invitation to give this inaugural lecture in one of the two series, named after distinguished scholars, that are being initiated by the Highland Theological College.<sup>1</sup> The works of John Murray and Fred Bruce both played an important part in my theological education and my Christian life more generally. John Murray was a well-known name from my student days onward as a careful systematic theologian in the evangelical tradition, at a time when there were not many such people, or at least not many of whom I had any knowledge. His Tyndale Monograph on *The Covenant of Grace* (London: Tyndale Press, 1954) came my way in 1955 not long after it was published and I am glad that I still have my copy of it. Then his book on *Principles of Conduct* (London: Tyndale Press, 1957) appeared and constituted what was really the one major work on Christian ethics from an evangelical standpoint for a long time. His work was solid, carefully wrought and deliberate in style. Somehow I never acquired a copy of his commentary on Romans, which is probably his best-known work. These written works gave the impression of a careful, sober scholar

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<sup>1</sup> This article reproduces, with minor alterations, the oral text of the inaugural F. F. Bruce Lecture, given at the Highland Theological College, Dingwall, on Friday, 1st October, 2004. (The inaugural John Murray Lecture was given on the same occasion by Richard B. Gaffin.) A modified version of the same lecture was given as a J. E. Davey Memorial Lecture in Union Theological College, Belfast, on 30th November, 2004. I am grateful to both institutions for the invitations to give these lectures and for their gracious hospitality during my visits.



who took everything very seriously. But then in 1966 he retired from Westminster Seminary and returned to the north of Scotland, fortunately not too far from the city where he had done his undergraduate degree, and the local group of the Graduates Fellowship invited him to speak to them somewhere around 1970. I had a delightful surprise to find that this gracious man, perhaps showing the mellowness of years, spoke simply and attractively without the scholarly cut and thrust of his books, and we readily invited him back to speak to us and were sorry that we could not see more of him. The acquaintance was brief but memorable.

Fred Bruce, or probably I should say F. F. Bruce, since his Christian name was hidden for years behind the formal initials, played a much greater role for me.<sup>2</sup> I first became conscious of him during my teens. I cannot now remember the chronological order in which things happened. One event was that my parents, who were keen attenders at the Keswick Convention, regularly took its weekly paper, *The Life of Faith*, and in due course it ran a series of teaching articles under the title of 'The Life of Faith Bible School', and some of the introductory topics were handled by Mr F. F. Bruce, Head of the Department of Biblical History and Literature in the University of Sheffield. He was also a contributor of book reviews. Round about the same time I became aware of his book, *Are the New Testament Documents Reliable?* and as the easiest way of acquiring a copy I bought one for my father for a birthday present, but I suspect that it was I who read it the more, and somehow it strayed onto my own bookshelf where it has remained ever since. That book was a brilliant introduction to the historical and literary problems of the New Testament, a classic of Christian apologetic, and I devoured it, both the content and the method. It demonstrated with all clarity that the way to deal with objections to the historicity of the New Testament and the events that it records is to know the subject and take on the critics rather than ignoring them and hiding

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<sup>2</sup> I. H. Marshall, 'Frederick Fyvie Bruce 1910-1990', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 80 (1992), 245-260.

one's head in the sand or assuming that because their presuppositions are wrong, therefore their case must be wrong. I came across articles by Bruce; shortly after it was published, I purchased his commentary on the Greek text of Acts with the money from a school prize in Latin, and about the same time in my first year at University I came across *The Dawn of Christianity*, and I was captivated. Whatever might be said about Bruce's lack of lustre as a speaker, and that applied in my opinion purely to the voice and not to the content, his writing was brilliant.

The publication of Bruce's commentary on Acts marked in my estimation the decisive point in the re-emergence of evangelical biblical scholarship. Here was the first major work by a non-liberal scholar to appear since the works of J. G. Machen and G. Vos which were a match for liberal scholarship, showing that to be an evangelical, with a justified belief in the reliability of the Scriptures, was now a viable option. True, it was to be part of a tiny group. There were not many people doing scholarship at this level and holding significant teaching positions, but there were now a few, and others came to light who had been quietly pursuing their work. Since then, the tiny stream has swollen immensely, and there are evangelical scholars in many of our major teaching institutions, and the example of men like Murray and Bruce stands behind the founding of this institution.

### The problem of 'penal substitution'

But now to our theme. During the past few years there has been some discussion within and without evangelicalism regarding the understanding of salvation 'solely through the blood and righteousness of Christ'.<sup>3</sup> In what way is the death of Jesus Christ

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<sup>3</sup> The phrase is taken from the interview between Charles Simeon and John Wesley in which their essential agreement on the fundamental doctrines of evangelicalism is established. See H. C. G. Moule, *Charles Simeon* (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1948 [originally

the ground of our salvation? Those of us who assent to the doctrinal basis of UCCF will be aware that we declare our belief in the doctrine commonly called penal substitution.<sup>4</sup> This expresses a very simple understanding of what happens in the death of Jesus Christ. It comprises two thoughts. First, all humankind is condemned to eternal death as the penalty imposed by God upon human sin. No matter how much or how little we may have sinned, there is a fixed penalty for all sinners, namely eternal death (of which physical death is both a part and a symbol). Hence arises the theological term 'penal'. Second, the death of Jesus on the cross was not merely a physical death but also the eternal death due to sinners, suffered on this occasion by one who was sinless and therefore not because of his own sins but because of his voluntary bearing of the death that was due to other people because of their sins. His death was thus instead of their death, and consequently those who accept him as their Saviour are freed from the penalty of their sins. He has died instead of them, and hence arises the use of the theological term 'substitution'. True, they still die physically (unless they survive to the second coming and are transformed as living people rather than raised from the dead), but they do not die eternally

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published 1892]), 79f., citing Simeon's *Horae Homileticae*. Moule opines that the interview is that recorded in Wesley's Journal for 20th December, 1784.

<sup>4</sup> I regularly indicate my assent to the UCCF basis that I have already mentioned, and I am also conscious that I am speaking today under the auspices of a College which explicitly or implicitly is committed to the same theological understanding, and I am giving a lecture named after, or, as the Americans would say, 'named for' a distinguished scholar who shared this same belief.



because Christ has died instead of them, and God will not require the penalty twice as it were.<sup>5</sup>

As you are doubtless aware, the doctrine has come under considerable discussion and even attack from several quarters in recent years and equally has been upheld by its partisans.

The writer whose work has attracted popular attention is Steve Chalke. In his own summary of what he says in his book, *The Lost Message of Jesus*, he explains that he believes that the spectrum of concepts that figure in a robust theology of the cross certainly includes 'a clear substitutionary element', but he finds most helpful the understanding of the cross and resurrection as victory over the forces of sin and evil that oppress people. He then goes on to say that the relatively modern idea of 'penal' substitution depicts 'a wrathful God who can only have his anger at iniquitous sinners appeased through bringing about the violent death of his Son', and

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<sup>5</sup> There is some difference of opinion regarding the scope of the substitutionary death of Jesus. Some argue that the death of Jesus was for the sins of all sinners but becomes effective only for those who believe, whereas others who argue that God intends to save only a limited group of people, the so-called elect, hold that the death of Jesus was only for the elect; it was potentially sufficient for all the world but in reality was effective only for the elect.

There is a further complication in that some argue that the death of Christ may be effective for some people who have not consciously believed, including others than those who die in infancy or the mentally disabled. And some would argue that in fact all people will be saved through the death of Christ for them. Or they may express the hope that somehow God will bring this to pass. I want to leave aside these problems regarding the scope of the death of Christ and to concentrate our attention on the specific problems raised by penal substitution in itself.

he finds this incompatible with the character of God and makes him out to be a 'cosmic child abuser', whereas Jesus taught non-violence.<sup>6</sup> A number of academic theologians have made similar comments and their views are helpfully surveyed by A. T. B. McGowan in an as yet unpublished paper.<sup>7</sup>

We should not exempt any aspect of our fundamental doctrines from theological scrutiny, since our doctrine of infallibility applies only to Scripture and does not extend to human statements of Christian belief, even though they claim to be entirely based on Scripture; we are to examine them not only so as to express them with all desirable precision, i.e. to understand them correctly, but also to face up to any objections that may be raised whether by ourselves or by other people. If our doctrines are attacked, we need to explore them and see whether the criticisms are justified, frame

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<sup>6</sup> S. Chalke and A. Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003). The quotations above were taken from Steve Chalke, 'Redeeming the Cross: The Lost message of Jesus & the Cross of Christ' (internet download, courtesy of S. J. Gathercole); see also 'Cross purposes', in *Christianity* (September 2004), 44-48.

<sup>7</sup> A. T. B. McGowan, 'Penal Substitution: J. I. Packer Revisited', paper at Tyndale Fellowship Christian Doctrine Study Group, 2004. See especially J. B. Green and M. D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000); C. E. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988); J. Goldingay (ed.), *Atonement Today* (London: SPCK, 1995). Attention should also be drawn to I. Bradley, *The Power of Sacrifice* (London: DLT, 1995); C. D. Marshall, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); R. Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama of Salvation: Toward a Biblical Doctrine of Redemption* (New York: Crossroad, 1999); T. Smail, *Once and for all: A Confession of the Cross* (London: DLT, 1998); J. D. Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

defences and responses, and express our doctrines in ways that will be comprehensible and meaningful to our audience.<sup>8</sup>

What then are the problems with the doctrine of penal substitution? Here are some questions that need to be asked.

1. Is it the uniform teaching of Scripture regarding the theological interpretation of the death of Jesus? Or is it a doctrine taught only in a few places in Scripture? Some scholars want to insist that it is the underlying motif beneath the various expressions of the theology of the death of Jesus. Others would state that it is only one of several aspects of the rationale for the death of Jesus, not always present, and perhaps not the most central.<sup>9</sup>

2. Is it in fact based on a correct understanding of the theological statements about the death of Jesus in Scripture? For example, there is considerable debate over the nature of sacrifice and whether sacrifice in the Old Testament functioned by virtue of penal substitution of the animal sacrificed for the sinner.

3. Even though it may be taught in Scripture, is it a doctrine that we can maintain today, or is it surrounded by such objections as to make it unacceptable? Here such questions arise as:

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<sup>8</sup> From the traditionalist side see C. E. Hill and F. A. James, III (ed.), *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Historical and Practical Perspectives* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004); D. Peterson (ed.), *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet: Proclaiming the Atonement Today* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001);

<sup>9</sup> Some may even deny whether it is to be found at all. V. Taylor says that it is striking that the New Testament teaching 'comes so near, without actually crossing, the bounds of substitutionary doctrine. Paulinism in particular is within a hair's breadth of substitution' (*The Atonement in New Testament Teaching* [London: Epworth, 1945<sup>2</sup>], 197).



What is the nature of punishment? Is it retributive, or what? Bound up with this is the understanding of what is meant by guilt.

Is substitution an acceptable way of dealing with sinners?

4. Are there other understandings of the New Testament teaching about the death of Jesus that may be regarded as more basic than penal substitution or that may be held alongside it as parts of a total understanding of that death?

5. How are other aspects of the life and work of Jesus related to our salvation, and how do they fit in with this doctrine? In particular, how does the resurrection fit into the picture as a saving event?

All of this combines to make an agenda far greater than can be addressed in one short discussion. I can do no more than introduce some of these questions and give some pointers that I hope may help us to answer them.

### Some basic affirmations

Let me begin with some basic truths that I consider to be essential to a New Testament theology of salvation.

1. We are saved from the consequences of our sins by the grace of God and not by anything that we ourselves can do.

2. In the death of Jesus the Father and the Son are acting together in love, so that there is no question of the Son acting to persuade an otherwise unwilling Father to forgive; the source of the atonement lies in the gracious agreement of Father and Son.

3. The decisive element in our salvation is the death of Jesus, or rather, the death and the resurrection of Jesus. 'Christ died for us' (Rom 5:8) and 'Christ died for our sins' (1 Cor 15:3) are fundamental Christian confessions.

4. This death is the death of one who is at one and the same time the Son of God and the sinless human being, the Second Adam.

5. It follows that the incarnation was an essential condition for the saving action.

6. The salvation secured by the death and resurrection of Jesus becomes effective through the work of the Holy Spirit and through the faith of the recipient.

7. The main results of the atonement are positively to restore us to a right relationship with God with all that that involves and negatively to deliver us from the guilt and power of sin.

Any doctrine of the death of Jesus must conform to or incorporate these basic points which are clearly taught in the New Testament. I list these points because I believe that they would be upheld by all of the evangelical theologians whose works are under scrutiny. However, this basic core of belief leaves unanswered just how the death of Jesus is the means of salvation.

### The biblical imagery

There are four or more basic pictures used to convey the significance of the death of Jesus in the New Testament, although they do not all fulfil exactly the same functions.

*Justification and reconciliation.* Two fundamental pictures used by Paul stand closely together. These are justification and reconciliation. The case for putting them together rests on the way in which in Romans 5:9-11 Paul makes remarkably similar statements using the two pictures of justification and reconciliation.

While we were yet sinners,  
Christ died for us.

While we were enemies,  
by the death of his Son,  
we were reconciled to God

All the more having then been justified now by his blood, we shall be saved by him from the wrath.	All the more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.
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The syntactical forms are not precisely the same, but the same elements appear in parallelism:

1. We were sinners//enemies.
2. Christ died for us/by his blood// by the death of his Son.
3. Having been justified//reconciled.
4. If God did that while we were sinners//enemies, how much more now that we have been justified//reconciled.
5. He will save us from the wrath//by his life.

By way of explanation it needs to be pointed out that here Paul is using 'save' in the future tense to refer to a future action involving deliverance from God's wrath at the last judgment. He is arguing *a fortiori* from what God did while we were unjustified and unreconciled to what he will undoubtedly do for his justified and reconciled people at the last judgment.<sup>10</sup> But the crucial statement

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<sup>10</sup> It seems to me that that final salvation must be on the same basis as the earlier justification and reconciliation. When we appear before the final judgment to answer for ourselves, the judgment is said to be on the basis of works in other passages, but conscious of the sins that I



for our present purpose is that here our justification and our reconciliation are based upon the death of Jesus and without that death neither would happen.

Justification speaks more of getting into a right relationship with God despite the fact that we have sinned and disobeyed him. Reconciliation presupposes more a situation of enmity, although the term is ambiguous and it is not always clear whether the expression of enmity comes from side or the other or is mutual. In both cases it can be assumed that sin is a barrier to acceptance by God. Sin can be seen as disobedience and rebellion that cannot be ignored by God.

*Redemption.* A third type of understanding is expressed by the term redemption. Redemption can be understood as release from a state of captivity; the captivity is to sin, but sin cannot be separated from the consequences that go with it (the wage that it pays), and therefore redemption is not just from the penalty of sin but also from its power and domination.

Closely linked with redemption is the concept of *victory* in which Satan, death and sin itself (regarded as an evil power) are overcome through the death and resurrection of Jesus, and hence those held captive by them are released. Hence the concept of redemption

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have committed since I was justified and the good that I have so often failed to do, I don't for one moment expect to be accepted on the basis of my deeds, but I shall point to Christ and say 'He died for me'. Charles Wesley sang, 'Bold I approach the eternal throne and claim the crown through Christ my own'.

This raises the question of how the passages about judgment by works are to be understood. One possibility is that they refer to reward and loss for the saved. Another possibility is that they emphasise that we are judged by what we have done and not on the basis of belonging to Israel, and make us realise that God is concerned with how we live and therefore we must take the fact of our sinfulness seriously and turn to the Saviour.

widens out the scope of salvation from the new relation of sinners to God to include also their deliverance from the evil powers to which they are subject.

*Sacrifice.* A fourth type of understanding is in terms of sacrifice. This term is different from those already mentioned in that all three of them express the new situation brought about in us by the death of Jesus, whereas this term (like victory) expresses rather how the actual death is to be understood, and there is no corresponding term to indicate the result of the action drawn from the same word-field. Whereas we can talk of the redeemed, the justified, and the reconciled, we don't have a word for the people who have offered an acceptable sacrifice. Rather, a common religious action in the ancient world is used metaphorically to indicate how the death of Jesus functions. The result here may be summed up as 'peace'.

These images that I have drawn from Paul are, of course, not peculiar to him. Elsewhere in the New Testament we find similar teaching. Justification and reconciliation are admittedly terms found mainly in Paul, but the parable of the prodigal son is surely a vivid illustration of reconciliation. Teaching about redemption is found in the ransom saying in Mark and Matthew and in 1 Peter and Revelation. Sacrificial language is more widespread. It is present in the Gospel of John with its understanding of the Lamb of God bearing the sins of the world: (John 1:29, cf. 1 John 3:5).<sup>11</sup> 1 John uses the language of atoning sacrifice (1 John 2:2; 4:10 and of fellowship with God (i.e. the result of reconciliation). Hebrews develops at full length the concepts of Christ as the sacrifice on the day of atonement and as the high priest who puts us in a right relationship with God.

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<sup>11</sup> This may mean to offer a sacrifice that cancels out the effects of sin or to bearing its consequences on behalf of others.

Behind these effects of the death of Jesus we can trace some important ways in which the death itself is understood.

a. In the Old Testament the people of Israel are brought into a covenant by their God as a result of which blessings and curses rest upon them according as they are faithful or unfaithful to him in regard to giving him exclusive worship and obedience. The sacrificial system is part of this, and it is concerned with cleansing the land from the effects of disobedience and also of restoring individuals to a right relationship with God. In the semi-ideal situation the people maintain their good standing with God despite lapses by sacrifices. The question of destiny after death hardly arises, since the judgments of God are this-worldly. Nevertheless, basic principles are instantiated which continue to operate once the idea of post-mortem reward and loss comes to the fore.

Persons who break the law come under the curse of the law: whoever breaks the law will suffer for so doing. But now, says Paul, Christ has become a curse for us by dying on the cross (Gal 3:13). Consequently, he has delivered us (Jews - ? and Gentiles) from the curse. This is one of the clearest examples of Christ taking the place of sinners by occupying the accursed position and dying. The law, we remember, is God's law and therefore ultimately the curse is imposed by God. The underlying rationale may well be that of the scapegoat over whom the sins of the people are confessed, and then the goat wanders off into the wilderness bearing the sins and presumably dies. The thought, however, is transformed by using the language of the curse and applying it to the death of the sinner or the one who bears the sins of others. Although the language of penalty is not used, the thought that Christ endures the consequences of sin and delivers us from having to bear them is clearly expressed.

b. God reckons the transgressions of people against them and they are his enemies. But Christ became sin for them and died for them (note the inescapable connection of 2 Cor 5:14-15 and 19-21 which makes it clear that Christ becoming sin and Christ dying are inseparable from each other) , and the implication is that

somehow this took their sin and liability to judgment/wrath away from them, so that they might enjoy the status of righteousness because he no longer holds their sins against them.

Some scholars see here simply an exchange: he became what we are in order that we might become what he is. But this leaves totally unexplained what happens. To put it crudely, what happens to the sin that is taken by Christ? Somehow it must be taken away, and this could not happen without his death.

c. Redemption or deliverance is equated with the forgiveness of sins (Eph 1:7). Thus, although redemption may be from the grasp of sin upon us, the key element is that forgiveness is granted by God. The term forgiveness is appropriate because the sinners do not have to undergo judgment and nothing is required from them by way of condition; so far as they are concerned, it is free. But it is through the blood of Christ, and therefore somehow his death is the means by which it is obtained. Again, we must ask why it is that deliverance from sin and forgiveness are linked to the blood or death of Christ.<sup>12</sup>

Here it is appropriate to mention the passages that use the concept of ransom (Mark 10:45; 1 Tim 2:6; Tit 2:14) where Christ gives himself or dies to set people free. A ransom need not imply substitution of one person for another, since it may be simply a monetary payment, but Peter makes the point that we were ransomed with blood. Since, as we have seen, death is the ultimate consequence of sin, and Christ suffered death, it would seem to me to require special pleading to argue that his death was anything other than a bearing of the death that sin inflicts upon sinners so that they might not have to bear it.

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<sup>12</sup> The blood is not mentioned in the parallel passage in Colossians 1:14, except in some late MSS that have harmonised the text to that of Ephesians; but one has not to read very far to find mention of it in connection with the reconciliation of God's enemies (Col 1:20).



d. Similar things can be said about justification, which is the corresponding picture from the law court (where normally the person is either acquitted because they were not guilty or is set free after personal payment of whatever the law requires). Again the point is made that so far as the guilty are concerned, they do not have to pay anything (Rom 3:24). But again it is clear that this is because something has been done. The key clue is in Romans 5:8-9 where justification is said to be by his blood and we are reminded that while we were sinners Christ died for us. We also need to bear in mind Romans 4:25 where justification is linked to the resurrection of Jesus. Finally, there is the complex statement in Romans 3:24 which explains that justification takes place by means of the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. The term redemption must be used in a fairly wide sense of deliverance from sin and its consequences; the phrase 'under sin' is used in Romans 3:9 with reference to both Jews and Gentiles. But one aspect of this imprisonment under sin is that people are held in the grip of divine judgment (Rom 3:19). By way of explanation of how redemption is possible Paul then asserts that God set him forth as a *hilastērion* and connects this with a demonstration or display of his righteousness.

Instead, then, of continuing with legal language, as if there might be something that Jesus did in terms of a court, like paying the fine for us, or even suffering a death sentence for us, Paul sees Jesus as somehow bringing about reconciliation with God; reconciliation (or peace with God, Rom 5:1) is certainly the outcome of whatever is indicated by the term *hilastērion*.

The meaning of this term is uncertain. It must refer to a process whereby a cleavage between God and human beings is removed, where a situation of enmity becomes one of fellowship, where transgressors are no longer counted as transgressors, where people become sons and daughters of God. On a personal level this means that God no longer treats transgressors as transgressors because something has happened to change the appropriate mode of action towards them. (Note that I am avoiding speaking of a change of attitude by God.). With due caution we can use the word propitiation, but I shall have something further to say about this.

An alternative is to say that something happens which has the effect of cancelling out their sin; this might be (in modern terms) either the performance of some good deed that makes up for the sin (like restitution in a spirit of penitence does) or the enactment of a penalty (note the mention of blood in Hebrews). If that is what the word is signifying, it is vitally important to recognise that what is happening is that the 'mechanism' by which propitiation is effected is being described. That is to say, by adopting this translation of the word, we have by no means removed the thought of propitiation from the verse; we are describing what happened, namely expiation for sin, in order that God might be propitiated.

The next stage is to note that there was an object in the Old Testament cult, the lid of the ark on which the blood of a sacrifice was smeared annually, which was referred to in the LXX as the 'propitiatory', often paraphrased in English as the mercy-seat. A number of commentators argue that this is the source of Paul's rendering here; he is equating Jesus, more specifically the dying Jesus, as the New Testament counterpart to the lid of the ark smeared with blood, and fulfilling the same function (or rather the function that was symbolised by the lid).<sup>13</sup>

And, further, we must note that the same word came into use round about this time to characterise the deaths of Jewish martyrs. In the Books of Maccabees, and specifically in 4 Maccabees we find an understanding of second-century BC Jewish history which goes like this. Our nation became apostate and disobeyed God; so God judged it by delivering it into the hands of pagan rulers who also persecuted and tortured and executed those Jews who were actually faithful to God and were thus relatively innocent. When dying they

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<sup>13</sup> Other types of sacrifice are also used to explain the death of Jesus. The passover sacrifice (1 Cor 5:7) and the sin offering both function in this way (Rom 8:3).

confessed that they were suffering because of the sins of their guilty compatriots and they pleaded with God to accept their cruel deaths on behalf of the sinful people and to see in them a sufficient bearing of punishment to enable God to say 'the people have suffered enough for their sins at the hands of the pagans, and I will bring it to an end'. The writer says: They became, 'as it were, a ransom for the sin of our nation. And through the blood of those devout ones and their death as an atoning sacrifice, divine Providence preserved Israel that previously had been mistreated' (4 Macc 17:22; cf. 12:17 NRSV<sup>14</sup>).

Further illumination comes from the earlier book of 2 Maccabees. Here the martyrs say 'we are suffering because of our own sins. And if our living God is angry for a little while, to rebuke and discipline us, he will again be reconciled with his own servants... I... give up body and life for the laws of our ancestors, appealing to God to show mercy soon to our nation... and through me and my brothers to bring to an end the wrath of the Almighty that has justly fallen on our whole nation (2 Macc. 7:32-33, 37-38 NRSV)

I think it is fair to put all this material together as providing the background to Paul's statement; it shows us something of the world of ideas within which he moved.<sup>15</sup> It indicates that the death of Jesus operates like a sacrifice in restoring right relationships between God and sinners. The parallel from 4 Maccabees is particularly important because it refers to suffering and death. In this case the martyrs do not claim to be sinless, but they are willingly submitting to death. Moreover, the suffering imposed by the pagan ruler is intended by God to rebuke and discipline: though

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<sup>14</sup> 12:18 in Swete's text.

<sup>15</sup> A useful compendium of the background material can be found in M. Hengel, *The Atonement: The Origins of the Doctrine in the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1981); cf. 'The Expiatory Sacrifice of Christ', *BJRL* 62 (1980), 454-75.

some Jews will die in it, the people as a whole may be moved to repentance. We must not forget this corporate aspect of biblical thinking, where the suffering and death of some is incidental to the transformation that may come about in the rest of the people as a whole.

If we bear all this in mind, then it becomes clear that Paul is viewing Jesus in his death as functioning in the way that is imperfectly represented by the martyrs. Yet it remains unclear whether the death of Jesus is seen as restitution for sin or as judgment upon it. I think the balance may well favour the latter because of the identification of Jesus with sinners and the statements about him bearing sins (though admittedly not in Paul).

### Penalty and retribution

How far is it appropriate to speak of penal substitution in the light of these passages?

In the New Testament the human situation is seen as one in which sinners face the wrath of God, principally in the context of the last judgment, although it is also operative here and now. Various attempts have been made to understand this not so much as the direct reaction of God to sin as rather the inevitable outworking of the effects of sin that God allows to happen. But, granted that Romans 1 shows that one form of judgment is the direct outworking of the sin itself, it must be insisted that this is not the only form and in this case a line between what God allows or permits and what he directly sanctions seems to me to be non-existent. God is as responsible for what he allows (assuming that he has power to cause things to happen otherwise) as for what he directly wills. Further, the language of wrath indicates personal involvement. We can in fact go in two directions from it. On the one hand, it leads in the direction of the language of law in which the idea of guilt and penalty is appropriate. On the other hand, it leads into the language of reconciliation, in which the language of enmity is appropriate. A problem here is the ambiguity of the term 'enemy'; does it express the attitude of God to sinners? Whether or not the word in itself



does so,<sup>16</sup> the fact that after their acceptance of the death of Christ God no longer reckons transgressions against sinners indicates that before that point he did so reckon them and therefore he would treat them as transgressors and liable to whatever should befall them.

This now raises the question of the nature of the reaction of wrath. Strong voices have been raised in recent years in favour of a fresh understanding of the purpose of penalties and punishment. There is something of a dialectic here. A major concern is the revaluation of the purposes and aims of human criminal justice, and it could be argued that this provides an analogy in the light of which we can understand divine justice. Alternatively, it might be argued, for example, that divine justice is the model upon which human justice is to be shaped. Either way, arguments can be offered for the inherently retributive nature of the penalties for offences.

There is no doubt that human punishment can and normally does include a complex of various elements.

a. *Reform*: it is hoped that the effect of the treatment will be to persuade the criminal to abandon crime.

b. *Restraint*: in some cases the purpose is to deprive a criminal of the freedom to commit further crimes.

c. *Deterrence*: the imposition of the penalty is intended to deter both the convicted criminal and others who may be tempted to act similarly from so doing by fear of the consequences.

The crucial question concerns what the convicted criminal may have to do in order for the offence to be no longer counted against him or her. Here two closely related concepts that are perhaps sometimes confused with one another must be noted.

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<sup>16</sup> I am inclined to think so, but only provided that we say with Calvin that he loved us while he hated us.

d. *Restitution and retribution.* It is in this context that the concept of *guilt* arises. It is a concept with three associated meanings. First, 'guilty' is a term used to refer to a person who has actually committed a particular offence rather than somebody who has not done so. When a court establishes that a person is guilty, that simply means 's/he did it', and when a person is acquitted that simply means 's/he did not do it', or perhaps 'it cannot be sufficiently established that s/he did it'. Second, 'guilt' may refer to the feeling of the person who has committed an offence, involving feelings of being blameworthy ('I should have driven more carefully') and moral failure ('I am ashamed of what I have done'). And, third, there is the understanding of guilt as a state from which a person can be delivered only by some act of restitution and/or retribution which is understood to cancel out the offence and it is no longer counted against the person. This is the sense that concerns us here.

It is commonly held that something should be required from the criminal to compensate for the crime. This can take two forms. The first is when the offender may do something that undoes (so far as possible) the effects of the crime (for example, the restoration of stolen property; paying for medical treatment for the victim of assault) or otherwise does some good to society as a whole (community service) and this may be at some personal cost in time, effort and money. The second is that the offender may pay a fine or serve time in prison. Here the thought is not just that the person must suffer something to bring home to them the fact of their crime as crime but also that in some sense the crime has not been 'paid for' until the criminal has suffered something comparable to the suffering that they have caused. This is most clearly so in the case of murder where a murderer is either subjected to loss of their own life or deprived of liberty for a so-called life sentence; the thought is that a life must be paid for with a life.<sup>17</sup> In these extreme cases,

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<sup>17</sup> Even though in practice a literal 'life-sentence' may not be imposed.

the element of reform may be absent, and deterrence may also be irrelevant.

It is clear that this fourth element really combines two elements of restitution and retribution.

Now in the case of biblical, divine judgments, there is no doubt that a reformatory element is present in the Old Testament, where the people of Israel collectively recognise that their sin has landed them in trouble and they turn back to God. But with the concept of the final judgment, as it is traditionally understood (never-ending punishment or eternal death), the only elements are deterrence (by the prospect and warning) and retribution. There is no reform, restraint or restitution.

A further point needs to be made at this juncture. There is the concept of forgiveness. Forgiveness is usually the offer of the restoration of good relationships in which the victim does not hold the offence against the offender but without requiring any restitution or punishment. In biblical and Jewish thought great importance is attached to repentance or penitence as an essential factor if forgiveness is to be offered to an offender. Some expression of regret is important, and needless to say this regret should come from the heart and not be merely an empty form of words if it is to be acceptable before God and indeed before the community. Forgiveness, then, may be conditional on the expression of penitence by the offender, but in ordinary usage it certainly is not something that is offered after punishment has been exacted.

Yet forgiveness is not always appropriate. In the case of children, parents may have to exercise sanctions lest the child thinks that they can offend as much as they like and get away with it. There is a process of moral education to be undertaken. And equally a criminal justice system cannot work on this principle or else crime would multiply without restraint. But in both of these cases it is the undesirable effects of free forgiveness on the offenders that is the problem.

The usual human understanding of forgiveness excludes the possibility that the person who forgives must first exercise some kind of retribution before they can forgive. The legal official doesn't say to the person who has just paid a fine 'And now I forgive you', although of course once the fine has been paid, the original situation before the offence has been restored and the offence is no longer held against the person.<sup>18</sup> This suggests that there is some distinction in ordinary usage between forgiveness, where no restitution or retribution is required, and the situation where an act of restitution or retribution is required and after it has been carried out the offence is no longer held against the person. When the New Testament speaks of divine forgiveness, we may have to understand it as requiring no restitution or retribution from the sinner, but as resting on something that God in his mercy has done to make it possible.

From this discussion it emerges that there are really several things to be dealt with after sin has been committed. One is the undoing of the situation caused by the offender, where somebody else is the victim. The second is the development of a society in which such offences are not committed. And the third is the change of heart of the offender from wilfully doing what is wrong to gladly doing what is right, a change that will include penitence for past offences.

There is, however, another crucial element to be taken in to account here. It is in effect the dissociation of the community from the criminal, the taking of action that shows that the community stands for justice and does not tolerate evildoers, and therefore takes action to reform them, in the hope that they will repent and eschew crime, or, if all else fails, to exclude them from the community. The biblical utterance 'Depart from me, you workers of iniquity' sums up this attitude.

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<sup>18</sup> However, it may need to be taken account of, if the person offends again in future.



It may well be that we should concentrate on this element. The biblical teaching is largely in terms of wrath and to some extent of judgment of sin and sinners. The need for restitution is clear enough in some of the OT legislation, and the act of restitution can be painful. The element of painful punishment is also present, but in the OT it is frequently reformatory; it must be remembered here that the thought is not simply of the reformation of individuals but of the nation as a whole; even though some people die as a result of judgment, the effect may be reformatory on the survivors and 'the nation' is put right with God. But I suggest that the main element is the exclusion of the sinner from the holy society and the presence of the holy God, and this is what is signified by the term 'retribution', although the latter is often understood more in terms of revenge or vengeance or exacting some penalty that is judged to involve suffering that is proportionate to the sin.

So I want to suggest two ways in which we may perhaps get at the root of the biblical teaching. Behind our simple talk about the 'penalty' of sin are two things. On the one hand, we can talk about the painful consequences of sin both for the sinners and for their victims; this thought is wider than that of the legal penalty and brings into consideration the whole set of miserable consequences of sin to which God gives sinners up, in the hope that this may lead to repentance. On the other hand, there is the divine upholding of justice and love and the exclusion of those who persist in injustice and lack of love. The ultimate form of such exclusion is depicted in the imagery of hell, death and destruction. Although the terms 'penal' and 'penalty' are rare in the New Testament, they can be understood more broadly than simply in legal terms to refer to the whole breadth of the consequences of sin. We can thus re-think the idea of retribution which often seems to consist simply in making a person suffer because they have offended us until in some arbitrary way they have suffered the appropriate measure of pain for their offence. And in this way we may be able to make progress in a better understanding of what human justice ought to achieve and equally of the nature of divine justice. Judgment on wrongdoing and wrongdoers is concerned with the upholding of righteousness

by the community or its ruler(s), the exclusion in one way or another of those who reject its moral standards, making restitution for the effects of sin where this is possible, and the restoration of penitent and repentant wrongdoers.

### The attitude of God

If we have come this far, I believe that we have already done something to disarm those who complain that the Bible depicts an angry and violent God. Specific accusations that are made include such statements as these:

The imagery depicts an angry Father who is persuaded to show mercy by the Son.

There is a conflict between mercy and justice/judgment in God.

The Father demands human sacrifice before he can forgive.

The Father inflicts violence on the Son.

These criticisms need to be answered, and I believe that the way to do so is not by denying the biblical perception of the significance of the death of Jesus but by understanding it correctly.

I start with the fact that biblical thinking contains paradoxes and tensions that may relativise some statements. One example is the situation of slaves and free persons. In 1 Corinthians 7:21-24 Paul says that human slaves who have become God's people are freed people<sup>19</sup> belonging to Jesus; but then he also says that other people who were humanly free become slaves of Christ. Putting these two statements together we must conclude that all believers are in one

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<sup>19</sup> Strictly they are 'freed' people of the Lord, not 'free'.

sense slaves and in another sense free.<sup>20</sup> Alongside this is the way in which the disciples in John's Gospel who acknowledge Jesus as their Lord are told that they are not his slaves but his friends (John 15:15), and Paul makes the point that believers are no longer slaves but sons (Gal 4:7). Must we not say that the more personal relationships somehow transform the less personal ones?

A second, more controversial example is the language of mutual service and subjection in Paul's letters (Gal 5:13; Eph 5:21; Phil 2:1-4; cf. John 13:14) which probably implies that the so-called subjection in marriage is not one-sided but mutual. So statements that appear to be in tension with one another if taken absolutely have to be understood at a deeper level.

But these are simply illustrations to prepare the way for another point. It is absolutely fundamental in the New Testament that it is God the Father who personally initiates and acts in the coming and death of Jesus to bring about redemption. It is therefore strange that we are told that the Son and the Spirit both intercede for believers with the Father (Rom 8:27, 34), although in the same breath Paul assures us that God knows the mind of the Spirit and that the Spirit intercedes according to the will of God and also that the God to whom the Son intercedes is for us, gave up his Son for us and will reject anybody who brings a charge against his elect. These passages make it abundantly clear to me that the picture of intercession must be understood as the use of a figure of speech from human relationships which must not be pressed literally to imply that the Father's mind is different from that of the Son or of the Spirit. We have a more clearly formulated doctrine of the Trinity than was possible for the first Christians in the infancy of Christian theologising, and we can understand perhaps a bit more fully how the Father, Son and Spirit are bound together in a fellowship of love so that they have the same purposes and the same knowledge. Therefore, the picture of intercession is simply one

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 6:19-20; Gal 5:1, 13.

way of assuring us that the Father shares the same loving purpose for us as the Jesus whom we know to have died for us and who is now in heaven with the Father and the Spirit who dwells in us and assures us of the love of God in our hearts and who speaks directly to the Father in heaven. There is an indissoluble unity between Father, Son and Spirit in the work of redemption.<sup>21</sup>

Now we apply this to the death of Jesus. The death of Jesus is the single action of Father and Son together. We can only think of them in human terms: the Father sends the Son, the Son obeys the Father and becomes incarnate; the Son dies on the cross. Nevertheless, the Father is in Christ reconciling the world to himself. We may debate whether in this critical verse it means that the Father was as it were in Christ or that the Father was reconciling the world through the agency of Christ, and perhaps both ideas are present. In any case the full involvement of God in the action is indicated.

But once we have said this, we have moved beyond any crude understanding of the Son satisfying the claims of the Father and persuading the Father to do what he was otherwise not minded to do to the reality of the Father himself giving his Son for us. Some theologians have spoken of the anguish of the Father himself enduring separation from the One who calls out, Why have you forsaken me? Indeed, there is a mystery that we cannot fathom. God the Father is there at the cross, self-sacrificially giving his Son to be one with humanity and die for its sins, and in one sense there is a separation as the Son does what human beings cannot do: he bears their sins. Paradoxically God is both present and absent. Dare we say that at the cross it is not so much a separation of the Father from the Son but of the Father from the Man who is bearing the sins of the world and dying for them? Put it this way: where

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<sup>21</sup> This is one of the pieces of evidence that lead to the principle *opera Trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa* (cf. H. Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics* [London: Allen and Unwin, 1950], 116.



was God when Jesus was dying? Who said, If God had been there, he would not have let it happen? God was there. The cross shows not just Jesus as representative, substitutionary man bearing the sins of the world, but God, God in Christ, taking on himself the sin of the world and its consequences and enduring them in himself to deliver us from them. 'Tis mystery all, the immortal dies.' 'Faith cries out, "Tis he, Tis he, my God who suffers there".' In the last analysis we cannot separate the operations of the Trinity and have the members of the Godhead working independently or in any kind of tension with one another.

The crucial and startling consequence is that Jesus does not propitiate the Father so as to change his attitude to sinners and make it possible for him to forgive sin. Rather, Father and Son together take upon themselves all the suffering and judgment caused by and due to sin and bear them for us. If Jesus Christ the Son is God, just as God the Father is God, then there can be no sense in which God propitiates God, any more than God needs to intercede with God. But both types of statement are intended to indicate as powerfully as possible that God is on our side to deliver us from our sins and their consequences.

This is no new conclusion. We are back with one of the greatest modern expositors of the evangelical doctrine of the cross, James Denney, who wrote: 'I have often wondered whether we might not say that the Christian doctrine of the Atonement just meant that in Christ God took the responsibility of evil upon Himself and somehow subsumed evil under good.'<sup>22</sup> I would only comment that I am suspicious of sayings with 'just' in them lest they be oversimplifications, and I reckon that Denney would agree that that simple statement in fact would need a lot of unpacking. But if we

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<sup>22</sup> From a letter to P. C. Simpson written in 1915; J. Denney, *Letters of Principal James Denney to His Family and Friends* (London, 1921), 187.

want a simple statement of the heart of the atonement it would be difficult to better this one.

Might we say that from a human angle Jesus provides in his death the offering that we as sinners need if we are to be reconciled to God, but that from the divine point of view, what we see is Father and Son united in love and righteousness to save sinners? Consequently the action of Jesus does not propitiate God to make him willing to forgive but rather provides the propitiatory, sacrificial means whereby sinners can get right with God. It does not, of course, merely give them peace of mind and reassurance that God is willing to receive them, though that is not unimportant, but, far more importantly, it creates the path whereby forgiveness is possible, 'Pardon—from an offended God'.

The fact of a divine judgment that must be taken seriously is necessary at the very least to discourage sinners from sin, and therefore there can be no suggestion that it is not there.<sup>23</sup> One function of divine judgment, therefore, in the NT as also in the OT is to warn sinners of the real consequences of sin.<sup>24</sup> The judgement

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<sup>23</sup> I sometimes think that the critics of divine judgment want to have it both ways. On the one hand, they insist that God as the moral ruler of the world is against the evil that is present in it, speaks out through his prophets in condemnation of it, and wants to overthrow it. On the other hand, they don't allow him to act in judgment and actually to pull down the mighty from their thrones.

<sup>24</sup> It has been argued that the warning passages addressed to believers in Hebrews and elsewhere have the function of encouraging sinful believers not to apostatise, and they function so effectively that in fact no sinful believers will ever apostatise, and the judgment described can thus be said to be hypothetical in that nobody will actually suffer it. Cf. T. R. Schreiner and A. B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001), p. 163. Whatever our assessment of this proposal, in the present case the judgment is real and not hypothetical.

upon sin is the abandoning of sinners to a situation without God, so that they are left under the power of sin and false gods that cannot save, and the end result is death. That is judgment, in that God wills it to be so. It leaves sinners to their sin. And God so wills it in order that his kingdom may be seen to repudiate sin and the sinners who do not repent of their sin.

How does God save from evil? Sin is a master exercising dominion, and therefore sinners need to be freed from the triple bonds of sin, the devil and death. So from this point of view God mounts a rescue package. It is here particularly that the resurrection comes into the story as the powerful, Spirit-wrought resurrection of Jesus from the dead creating new life and involving obedience to a new master.<sup>25</sup> Paul works along this line at the same time as he does along the justification/forgiveness/reconciliation line. It is the negative counterpart to the positive one of the new relationship to God.

Consequently, the accusations fall to the ground. I remind you of them:

The imagery depicts an angry Father who is persuaded to show mercy by the Son.

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<sup>25</sup> One point not so far raised is how the resurrection fits into the justification scenario. One possibility is provided by Hebrews where it is shown that Jesus as the high priest had to enter into the presence of God in order to present the blood that had been shed. The cross was in effect the altar, but the blood had to be taken into the holy place. Therefore, in this sacrificial imagery, the death of Jesus was occasioned by our sins, but the resurrection was for the purpose of justifying us. See R. B. Gaffin, *The Centrality of the Resurrection: A Study in Paul's Soteriology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978); M. F. Bird, 'Justified by Christ's Resurrection: A Neglected Aspect of Paul's Doctrine of Justification', *SBET* 22 (2004), 72-91.

There is a conflict between mercy and justice/judgment in God.

The Father demands human sacrifice before he can forgive.

The Father inflicts violence on the Son.

The Father is not persuaded to show mercy by the Son, because the Father sent the Son and they act together.

There is no conflict between justice and mercy. The Father is dealing with the mystery of evil and its consequences to deliver sinners.

The death of Jesus is not a human sacrifice to enable God to forgive, but the action of God himself who in his mercy provides the remedy for sin: it cannot be too strongly emphasised that it is God who suffers on the cross.

And the Father does not inflict violence on the Son; rather the Son who is God takes upon himself the consequences of cosmic and human sin and defeats them. From another point of view, the Son takes death upon himself freely and voluntarily in obedience to the Father, and the Father for his part overcomes death by raising him from the dead. What God in Christ does is to enter into this violent world and defeat it precisely by non-violence, as Peter points out so carefully in 1 Peter 2:21-25. If the Son is non-violent, we can hardly say that in contrast to him the Father is violent.

### Conclusion

What exactly have we done in this examination of the subject?<sup>26</sup> I suggest that we have done three things.

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<sup>26</sup> These are not the only problems that critics have raised with regard to the doctrine of substitution. Another set of questions concerns the danger that if Christ acts as substitute for us and we have nothing to do



First, we began by examining the New Testament evidence, principally in Paul but backed up and confirmed by the other writers. Various imagery is used for the significance of his death. We have seen especially how Christ has taken upon himself the sin of humanity and the suffering and death resulting from it. This led us to explore more fully the nature of judgment upon wrongdoing and sin, and I have tried to show that judgment has various connected functions that include the expression of the rejection of sin and sinners who cling to their sin by God and his people and a means of facilitating the repentance and restitution that need to be demonstrated by sinners. Jesus as the sinless Man and as the Son of God becomes one with sinners in their sin and in his own person he not only shows the perfect righteousness and obedience to God that they failed to show but also and above all he bears their sin and all its consequences so as to overcome the power of sin and to express the divine disapproval of it. He undoubtedly acts in the place of sinners and he undoubtedly suffers the consequences of their sin,

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except have faith, then there is the danger that there may be no real change in us. We cheerfully accept what somebody else has done for us but it doesn't necessarily change us into different people. Within the space of one lecture there is no time to take up this theme and all that I can briefly say is that this objection does not take into account the way in which Paul in particular develops his doctrine of faith-union with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection so that our life takes on the same cruciform shape. There is thus a kind of reverse action whereby delivered from death as the wages of sin we die with Christ to sinful desires and sin. It entirely ignores the motive of gratitude that is aroused by so great a sacrifice: we love, because he first loved us. It fails to reckon with the fact that faith is an act of commitment to Jesus, resulting in a transfer of ownership from sin to our risen Lord; the basic Christian confession is 'Jesus is Lord' rather than 'Jesus is Saviour'. Nor can conversion be separated from all that is associated with new birth and indwelling by Spirit through which the risen life of Christ becomes a reality in us. The objection is totally unjustified. See my *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove: IVP/Leicester: Apollos, 2004), 223-226.

and therefore we rightly call his act substitutionary.<sup>27</sup> If we broaden out the sense of the term 'penal' to embrace all those consequences in which he suffers not only the pain inflicted by hostile sinners upon other people, including God himself, but also the pain that comes upon sinners themselves, then it seems to me that the continued use of the term is fully justified. So I am suggesting, first, that a clarification of the nature of judgment helps us to a better understanding of the death of Christ.

However, second, if the phrase arouses wrong ideas of God inflicting violent pain upon his Son, then we should be prepared to adopt another term that is less open to misunderstanding. 'Substitutionary suffering and death' will do very well, although it is more cumbersome. I remind you that, although the term 'fundamentalist' has a noble ancestry, nevertheless it has been so twisted in popular usage that it is not helpful for us to use it of ourselves, however much we hold fast to those fundamental doctrines that were upheld by our forerunners. That is to say, the concept and the phraseology used to express it are distinguishable, and it is possible for us to hold fast to the concept while looking for terminology that may communicate it more effectively to our contemporaries.

The third thing that we have done is to recognise the importance of trinitarian thinking in relation to the death of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, so that we take seriously the fact that the Father and the Son are acting together in the act of atonement, God bearing in himself the dire consequences of sin that sinners, who are totally unable to

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<sup>27</sup> The concept of 'representative' is sometimes used instead, but it conveys only the idea of one man acting on behalf of and representing humanity, which is true as far as it goes but does not bring out adequately the crucial fact that it is the Son of God who takes on this role and does instead of human beings what they cannot do. Once we say that Christ as the Son of God does something instead of us we are talking of substitution.

save themselves, may be delivered from their sin through faith in the Son of God who loved them and gave himself for them and the God who commends his own love towards us in that Christ died for us. The doctrine of the Trinity is our firm defence against any false suggestion that God the Father had to be appeased by the Son in order to bring about his purpose of redemption.

I believe that in such ways as these we can both clarify and defend the doctrine expressed in the phrase 'penal substitution', and I continue to subscribe to declarations of the evangelical faith that enshrine this fundamental and essential doctrine.

*Difficult Gospel: The Theology of Rowan Williams* by Mike Higon published in paperback by SCM Press in 2004 at £14.99 sterling.

Who is the most important theologian writing in the English-speaking world today? Opinions will differ on the best answer to this question, but a case can be made for claiming that title for the present Archbishop of Canterbury. His theology is important not only because of the high office he holds and the prestige given to the incumbent of Lambeth Palace by the world-wide church, but also because it is based firmly on Rowan Williams' experience of God.

At the heart of the theology of Rowan Williams is a transforming encounter with the living Christ. Rowan Williams has been and is amazed and enthused by the experience of being held in the loving, accepting gaze of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. His theological thinking is a response to this personal gift. 'What difference does it make to my self-understanding, if I believe myself to be held in a loving accepting gaze?' asks Williams. Then, becoming aware that God who loves him loves the world also, he asks, 'What difference does it make to our understanding of how we might live together if we believe that each of us is held in the same loving regard?'

Those of us who have wrestled with Williams' books know that they are always difficult to understand. Williams writes in an obscure, abstract style, never using one short word where a dozen long words will do. One can sympathise with the minister who gave up reading one of Williams' books after reaching the eightieth page, when it dawned on him that he had not understood anything of what he had read. Williams deserves the criticism that his style has earned from fellow theologians and the lampooning to which he has been subjected by the pens of satirical journalists.

However, there is another sense in which his theology is difficult. Williams believes in the God who became utterly vulnerable in Christ and therefore 'demands my soul, my life, my all.' The gospel could not be more difficult than this. Williams believes that Christianity is not about a Christ who saves us the trouble of being crucified, but whose followers must also bear the cross. Williams



believes in the Jesus represented by the empty tomb, a Jesus who has a continued, uncontrollable and inexhaustible presence in the world. This is difficult for all of us to swallow. Those who like to have their religion cut and dried are bound to find Williams' uncontrolled and uncontrollable God difficult. Those whose theology rests on the bland and unthinking repetition of favourite 'proof texts' are bound to have difficulty with a thinker, whose study of scripture begins and ends not with certainty but with wonder. The evangelist who has a direct line to the Almighty and knows with absolute certainty the answers to all questions will hesitate before Williams' view of God as 'the great negative theologian', who shatters all our illusions by means of the cross of Christ. Williams is convinced that 'dogmatic language becomes empty and even destructive of faith when it is isolated from a lively and converting worship and a spirituality that is not afraid of silence and powerlessness.'

Indeed the Archbishop has a special liking for the Jesus of Mark's gospel, a Jesus who holds back from revealing who he is, lest the words describing him should 'take on the colouring of the world's insanity.'

Only at his trial in Mark 14 does Jesus speak plainly because by that time 'there is little or no danger that we shall now mistake what he means.'

This uncontrolled and uncontrollable Christ will not allow us to avoid our responsibilities, nor will he allow us to escape the many manifestations of his grace. Williams believes that 'our faith depends on the possibility of meeting Christ in any and every place, and in any and every person.' Moreover when faced with a thorny problem the man or woman of faith should 'look long and hard at an unpromising situation until God comes to light.'

In the realm of politics Williams' convictions reflect the Christ who is present in and through the life of humanity. The voice of the other may contain the voice of Christ and therefore should be listened to. War, which inevitably means that nations stop listening to one another, is almost always wrong. The many voices with which humanity speaks reflect 'back to God his own generous outpouring.'

It is hardly surprising that this self-styled 'hairy leftie' has no time for chauvinism in whatever guise it appears.

In the realm of sexual morality Williams is conventional, considering sex before marriage and adultery wrong. However, he is also aware that for many of us it is in a sexually intimate relationship, more perhaps than anywhere else, that we learn how vulnerable we are to another, how dependent we are on another. The self-giving, vulnerability of love mirrors the life of God. Therefore Williams asks us to imagine a Christian homosexual saying, 'I truly, prayerfully, and conscientiously do not recognise Romans chapter one as describing what I am or what I want.' He suggests that a homosexual relationship might be one which can, like a heterosexual relationship, show Christ to the world.

Mike Higon is to be congratulated for throwing light on the often obscure writing of a man of deep Christian faith. After reading this book many of us, who have found Williams difficult in the past, will return to his writings, saying with Jacob, 'I will not let thee go, except thou bless me.'

Denis Campbell.

Eamon Duffy – *Faith of our Fathers: Reflections on Catholic Tradition*. [London: Continuum, 2004] 187 pages. €14.99

How does one modernize a religion that has evolved throughout two millennia of history and is steeped in tradition? The answer is 'with great difficulty'. Eamon Duffy is Professor of History of Christianity in the University of Cambridge. He grew up in the Irish town of Dundalk in the days before the Second Vatican Council and left for England at the age of sixteen. He is a devout Roman Catholic with first hand knowledge of the prevailing theology and piety both before and after the Council.

Moreover, as a historian he has learned the lessons of history better than the average man or woman in the pew and indeed better than many a bishop or cardinal. Duffy explores the relationship between the old piety that has been swept away and the new atmosphere of 'aggiornamento'. His conclusions are bleak and his stance is



polemical. Insufficient thought has been given to how to make changes while preserving the best of the old. He leads the reader through most of the important aspects of Roman Catholic faith and practice, among them devotion to Mary and the saints, the papacy, the priesthood, death and dying, prayers for the dead, hell, tradition and authority. In too many cases the baby has been thrown out with the bath water.

This is a most entertaining book. Duffy writes with a light touch, with much wit and humour. He describes purgatory as “an out-patients’ department of hell.” He tells of the electronic dashboard Saint Christopher that is activated by excess speed to warn the driver, “O.K., Bud you’re on your own”. But Duffy’s aim is serious, indeed at times despairing. He feels that the liturgy has been sanitized, that the regular worship of high days and holy days has been thoughtlessly dispensed with, that prayer has been emasculated into a sterile blandness, that renewal has been confused with modernity, that the old has been scorned for insufficient reasons. The most vivid passages in the book are descriptions of the religious practices of his Dundalk childhood along with an appreciation of what these practices achieved in educating the faithful and in encouraging religious devotion.

Yet Duffy is no reactionary. He admits freely the inadequacy of pre-conciliar Roman Catholicism and has no wish to return to those days. But he is equally ill at ease in the modernized church, which has too willingly dispensed with mystery, wonder, discipline and, as a consequence, is dwindling in number. He points out that abstaining from meat on Fridays was swept away without any deep theological reflection on the reasons why fasting is a worthwhile discipline. It is surely alarming that most Roman Catholics do not even know that they are expected to adopt an alternative Friday discipline in its place.

In a study of the many beauties of the church of San Clemente in Rome, Duffy comments: ‘The church yields its meaning only to slow mediation and close attention to the traces of the past which it contains, some of it half-buried and forgotten, and, as in the recent excavations, it is always being rediscovered, but only with labour and cost and love and a certain amount of luck.’ His warning to the

Roman Catholic Church today is clear. These are urgent alarm bells that we in other denominations ignore at our peril. Duffy continues, "We grow from our own past, and we only flourish when we are in touch with that past."

All of our churches today are threatened by a new generation that rejoices in ignorance of tradition. They tend to dress in jeans and t-shirts and are armed with guitars, drumkits and powerpoint projectors. They display such a cocky self-confidence about the modernity of the faith that they see no need to respect the long history of the church that nurtured them. They are like rebellious children who disown their mother. Duffy's crisis is one that all of us face.

Duffy urges the bishops to begin the vital task of educating the faithful in theology. Yet even as he calls for action, one cannot help feeling that it is already too late, that the treasures of tradition will continue to be trampled on or swept into spiritual dustbins or mocked by trendy clerics who are possessed by a Blairite urge to be modern without any regard to the riches of our heritage. The bathwater has disappeared gurgling down the plug-hole and we are now searching in increasing panic for any signs of the baby.

Denis Campbell.